

## The Blessed Virgin Mary

Gal. 4: 4-7 & Luke 1: 46-55

I wonder which voices you listen to? Family members... your partner... your parents... your children... your doctor... the BBC... the Express & Star... Boris Johnson... ITV... government spokespeople... particular pundits and TV/radio presenters... social media personalities... There are so so many voices clamouring for our attention. I wonder which ones you listen to; and I wonder which ones you try *not* to listen to! Which voices do you seek out for advice and wise counsel - friends, parents, partners, spiritual leaders? How do we block out certain voices? And what about *spiritual* listening? As we seek to follow Jesus and be faithful disciples day by day, how do we carve out peace and create space to hear the voice of God?

Over the last couple of years, I've thought quite a bit about my voice. Some of you may know that I had the privilege of being one of just 60 clergy from across the country to be selected as a participant on the National Church's Strategic Leadership Development Programme - a truly fantastic 5 years, with first rate input; remarkable colleagues who've become friends; and deeply challenging personal development.

A key focus for me has been around building my self confidence and using my voice. That might sound strange to you, given that I'm a Vicar, and that even though I mostly serve in Perton, you listen to my voice at regular intervals! And yet I'm actually someone who's naturally quite reserved, and in unfamiliar contexts, tend not to contribute. Initially, on this national leadership course, with all these exceptional folks, I rarely said anything, fighting good-old "Imposter Syndrome" and doubting I had anything to add to the discussion, or that I would be able to communicate my thoughts coherently!

Over the course of the programme this is something I really worked on; as I sought to challenge myself to use my voice in different contexts. As part of this I had the opportunity to be part of Lichfield Diocese's Strategic Development Group. This is a small team of 7, all of whom are senior leaders in the Diocese - and *me*! For a while I struggled to contribute, and then realised that I brought an important and unique voice to those gatherings. Around that table, I was the only parish clergy person; that I brought the voice of the grassroots, of parish life and experience, to those senior leaders, who, in some ways. are quite removed from it.

There are lots of ways in which I have been - and am continuing - to grow in confidence to use my voice. I've also been challenged that as a parish priest, I have a responsibility to use my voice within the community I serve to speak *about*, and *for*, those whose voices are rarely heard.... So, for example, in Perton over the last year or so, we've had services focusing on the Black Lives Matter Movement; on Domestic Violence; on ecological issues and so on.

You probably all know the famous saying that we each have one mouth and two ears, and so should be quick to listen and slow to speak. Whilst that's true, and listening is so so important, we do also each have a voice; and have a responsibility to *use* our voices - to share our *own* thoughts; and to speak up for those who within society are rendered voiceless. As Christians, we *all* use our voices to speak *of* God, and speak *to* God.

Another, vitally important way in which we use our voices, is in our personal response to God. Today is a special festival day in the church calendar - it's the day we give thanks for and commemorate the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary is someone who used her voice in response to God, and from whom we can learn.

It's quite a mouthful isn't it - The Blessed Virgin Mary?! I hope you don't think it's irreverent, but many clergy abbreviate this title to 'The BVM'! Today is the day we celebrate and give thanks for the BVM, for Mary. I think that for some of us in the Protestant part of God's Church, there's a degree of fear, aversion or negative emotional reaction to the mention of Mary and festival days in her honour.

Of course it's true that in some *other* parts of God's church - in fact in the majority of God's Church - Mary is given a status and prominence that many Protestants are uncomfortable with. I'm not suggesting we adopt, without thinking, an entirely Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Coptic perspective on Mary. But there *is* a real danger that we, in the Protestant tradition, loose out on the wonderful richness and truly remarkable example of Mary - miss out on getting to know this phenomenal woman of faith.

So let's consider Mary for a few minutes together now. The passage set for today comes towards the end of the opening chapter of St Luke's gospel. We heard Mary's amazing song of praise, often known as The Magnificat. This song of praise comes after both the shocking and bewildering account of the annunciation - when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was going to have a baby who is the son of God! - and after Mary went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Very well known passages which set the context for our reading.

So what do we know about Mary, and how she used her voice in response to God? As you may be aware, the age of betrothal for girls at that time was soon after their 12<sup>th</sup> birthdays, for boys it was later, around 16 years' old. Mary was a young Galilean teenage girl, recently betrothed. We can imagine her daydreaming and excited at the prospect of her forthcoming marriage to the local carpenter - daydreaming about the life they might have together; of their own family... and then, one normal day, while going about her everyday chores, God's messenger came to her!

Mary met an angel! He spoke God's message to her, first telling her that God thought very highly of her - let's just pause there... I guess it's impossible to imagine, but just picture that moment: an angel telling Mary that God thinks very highly of her... wow! The angel then went on to announce that God had singled her out; that she would have a baby, whom she must name Jesus; and that her son would be the Son of the Most High! It's *impossible* for us to imagine what this encounter was like for Mary - to put ourselves into her shoes and to imagine how we might respond.

*Mary's* response is so striking - she didn't panic or scream, as perhaps we might expect of a terrified teenage girl - rather she asked questions; she sought to understand - asking how she could possibly have a baby, being a virgin.

The angel answered her questions - Gabriel's *words* are clear, but their *meaning* inexplicable... miraculous. He explained that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, enabling her (as the Holy Spirit always does), to do and to be more than she could by herself; and that the power of God would rest on her. God's power and the indwelling Holy Spirit, would together result in things happening which are simply unfathomable in purely *human* terms.

We can imagine that Mary was left utterly reeling by the angel's message - but her response is *truly* amazing; speaking out her *incredible* statement of faith and trust in God: "*I am the Lord's servant... may your word to me be fulfilled - may it happen to me as you have said.*" Mary cannot *possibly* have had *any* idea what it would mean for her - for her life - to say 'yes' to God. She had no idea what saying 'yes' to God would *cost* her. And yet she used her voice, giving *absolute* consent to God, without conditions.

We know that her 'yes' cost her so very very much. We know what happened - that in due course we find Mary, thirty plus years' older, with her son: the one she said 'yes' to; the one she's loved and supported through the years, despite his strange lifestyle and message - we find her, at the foot of the cross, with her son, as he died a most horrific death.... A mother watching her child die.

When Mary said 'yes' to God's angel, she had *no* idea what lay ahead; but she *meant* it - she was *utterly* faithful to God's calling on her life, no matter what. We *know* that, because she was *there* - she saw it through - she was there at the foot of the cross - despite her personal agony - as her son died.

*"I am the Lord's servant... may it be to me according to your word."*... For me, Mary is truly remarkable - and St Luke's account is incredibly challenging - when I read and hear afresh Mary's whole-hearted response to God, I'm moved and deeply challenged by her use of her voice, by her words and what they reveal of her heart, and her faith.

I see in Mary the most incredible example of a faithful disciple saying 'yes' to God - a *whole-hearted* 'yes'... irrespective of the tremendous cost and sacrifice this 'yes' would bring. This teenage girl is an amazing example and profoundly challenging. I *can't* think of a *better* example of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus; faithfully trusting God over the long-haul - through all the ups and downs of life - *not* counting the cost. The fantastic news is that Mary was *also* there on Easter Day when Jesus was raised to life - she *remained faithful* to God's calling; she stayed true to God and to her 'yes' to him all those years before, even *beyond* the death of her son... and she saw him again, resurrected to new life.

After the angel's announcement to Mary, probably still reeling from encountering an angel, Mary decided to visit her cousin. *Surely* Mary wasn't yet *showing* her pregnancy, but, when she entered Elizabeth's home, the child within *Elizabeth's* womb leaped for joy. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and made this incredible claim: *'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!... Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!'*

Wow - that's *quite* a response to Mary simply walking into the house! I find this exchange between these women so very beautiful. Luke's description paints an intimate, very human, portrait of these two women - their situations so different, yet their lives inextricably linked. Luke shows us the *older* woman - pregnant at *last* after all reasonable, human hope had gone; 6 months into *her miracle* pregnancy - and also the *younger* woman - pregnant *far sooner* than expected - unplanned - just a few days or weeks into *her miracle* pregnancy. God gives Elizabeth divine knowledge, not *only* of Mary's, as yet, hidden pregnancy, but of the *importance* of this child within her womb - Elizabeth calls Mary, *"the mother of my Lord"*; Elizabeth *affirms* Mary's *faithful* obedience to God.

Since the angel visited her, we can imagine that those in the neighbourhood of Nazareth where Mary lived, would've been saying the *opposite* of Mary - that she must've been *unfaithful* to her betrothed; and probably - as news of Mary's pregnancy spread round the community - as surely such a rumour would - we can assume she would've been the subject of gossip-lovers; those feeding on the imagined scandal; and that Mary would've been aware of the talk, the looks, the suspicion; that she'd have felt the isolation. And yet, of course, the *truth* was that Mary was being *faithful* - faithful to her *betrothed* - and, even *more* importantly, faithful to God. But, that's *not* what others thought. So imagine how *wonderful* it would've been for Mary, when she arrived at Elizabeth's house, to receive this overwhelmingly *positive* greeting - so re-assuring. *Elizabeth recognised* Mary's faithfulness, and she *confirmed* that the child Mary was carrying is the *Lord*.

And how did Mary *respond* to this great affirmation and encouragement? She burst into song - the truly amazing and beautiful song of praise we heard read to us - known to many of us as, "The Magnificat".

This young Galilean woman's astonishing song of praise has become one of the most familiar passages of scripture - recited *daily* by many across the centuries, across the world, in the services of Evensong or Evening Prayer; the words turned into many fabulous hymns, one of which we'll sing later in our service. Mary's *first* response was to praise God.

Her words are wonderful statements and declarations - praising God. What we might *not* realise is that almost every phrase of this song comes from the Hebrew Scriptures. Mary, in her exuberance and her joy, sings... and as she does so, she quotes lines that come to her mind, lines she's learned from the Hebrew Bible - our Old Testament - phrases that lie deep within her, and which she makes her own at this profound moment.

A large part of Mary's song resonates with the ancient song of Hannah, recorded in 1 Samuel 2 - the song which Hannah sang to God, as she celebrated the miraculous birth of Samuel and what God would do through him. As Mary bursts into song, she quotes Hannah's song - uses Hannah's ancient words as *she*, in turn, praises God for the child in *her* womb, and for what God will do through *him*, through Jesus - *and* through her cousin Elizabeth's unborn son - John the Baptist.

What underlies this *fantastic* song of Mary is firstly her hopes and dreams that what the prophets of old had said, *would* come true - that God would *indeed* rescue his people and bless all nations through them. Mary sings in faith and hope that the child she's carrying *is* the Lord, the Saviour of her people, and the one through whom the whole world will be blessed.

But what also, secondly, fundamentally underlies Mary's fantastic song, is simply a celebration of God. Mary's response to good news, to the affirmation through Elizabeth of her faithfulness and the confirmation that the child she's carrying is the Lord - the Saviour God had promised of old - is to *sing*; to praise God, celebrating and thanking him.

There are two ways in which Mary used her voice and which provide profound examples to us:

Firstly, she used her voice to say yes to God, "*I am the Lord's servant... may it be to me according to your word.*" She said yes to God's call on her life, not counting the cost, and she was faithful to that yes to God throughout her life. She spoke up and said yes to God.

Mary said yes to God, following God's will for her life. In a few minutes' time, we will be invited to pray the words that Jesus gave to his disciples - including you and me - The Lord's Prayer. It's so familiar of course, and one of the well-known and loved phrases which so easily roll off our tongues, is , "*your will be done*".

As we use our voices to speak these familiar lines, let us deeply consider what we are saying - '*your will be done*'. Can we, *today*, follow Mary's example? Can we use our voices to say a whole-hearted 'yes' to God, even though we have no idea what that might mean - the ups and downs to come... what the cost might be?... "*I am the Lord's servant... your will be done*"...

Secondly, Mary used her voice as she sang praises to God, singing in response to the good news of his Saviour coming. May we also follow her example in this - may we, now that we're allowed to! - sing our praises to God for taking the initiative in becoming one of us, in order to save us... and let's praise God for loving us *this* much.